Archive as Memory: The Role of Repositories in Shaping the History of the Wages for Housework Movement

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On my first visit to the International Wages for Housework (WFH) Campaign archive at the Bishopsgate Institute in London, the archive's presentation concerned me. A highly curated selection of mostly photocopied documents, the archive is ordered chronologically between the years 1970-2022, with one folder roughly corresponding to each year of the Campaign. I was accustomed to archives overflowing with primarily original documents, like the Lotta Femminista archive I would subsequently visit. Located at the Biblioteca Civica in Padua, the Lotta Femminista archive holds 872 items, ordered thematically and spanning the years 1970-2012. As a researcher accessing primary sources for my PhD dissertation, my academic bias was evident: I distrusted the London archive and uncritically accepted the Padua archive. I continued to mull over why I had strong feelings about these archives, later rejecting the desire to judge them by quality standards I had learnt within the academy. After all, these were grassroots feminist movement histories; why should their archives be the exclusive domain of scholars and academics?

This question prompted a reflection on the role of archives in curating and transmitting social movement memory, a timely consideration in an era where political unrest and social change are at an all-time high. Activists and scholars alike are turning to the WFH movement and its archives for inspiration and guidance. The Campaign began in 1972 following the formation of the International Feminist Collective in Padua, and signatories included Maria Rosa Dalla Costa, Silvia Federici, and Selma James. The group engaged in several struggles based on demystifying women's unpaid labour, abortion, welfare benefits, and reproductive health. Struggles were determined by the needs of the WFH Committees worldwide, convening under the umbrella of the International WFH Campaign. After five

years of struggle, Dalla Costa and Federici (amongst others) left the group due to political differences, whilst James continued the campaign into the present day under the umbrella group Global Women's Strike (GWS). These political differences spilled out into different approaches to remembering and historicising the WFH Campaign, bringing activists into conflict with one another.

In this note, I explore the divergent approaches taken to remembering the Campaign via the archives in Padua and London, analysing how their curation shapes and contests social movement memory. In this respect, I treat the archives as repositories of primary sources about the WFH Campaign and as participants in the construction and transmission of memory. Using insights from memory studies, archival sciences, and social movement studies, I compare the provenance, archival structures, and political functions of each repository to argue that archives are not neutral records, but active sites where power, history, and social identity are produced and contested.

MEMORY AND POWER FROM THE ARCHIVAL TO ACTIVIST TURN

The intersection between the fields of memory studies, archival studies, and social movement studies has been of interest to scholars since the 1990s, roughly corresponding to the cultural and archival turns within the humanities and social sciences. The work of Maurice Halbwachs had a major impact beyond memory studies. After being originally published in the 1920s, Halbwachs' work, specifically his concept of collective memory, was taken up again by memory studies scholars in the 1990s. Collective memory can be described as the culmination of individual memories about groups, which may include the family, an organisation, or a nation-state.[1] Halbwachs also draws attention to collective frameworks of memory, which include the archive, as public sites of memory (re)collection.[2] Memory is necessitated by a will to remember, and collective memory is the recalling of events that have a contemporaneous effect on the continual re-formation of a group identity. The question remains as to what makes collective memory collective. Jeffrey Olick distinguishes between 'collected' and 'collective' memory. For Olick, collected memory is determined by a subset of individuals who have access to the means of cultural

[1] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. by Lewis A. Coser (University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 39.

[2] Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, p. 40.

production, including the archive,[3] and recollections about a group do not represent collective memory. Instead, collective memory comprises the social actors and institutions that remember the past.[4] In the context of the archive, we should therefore centre the multiple processes that shape and produce the memories contained within collections.[5]

These concerns are shared in what is known as the archival turn of the 1990s and 2000s, most famously argued by Jacques Derrida's essay 'Archive Fever.' Derrida asserts that 'There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory.'[6] Furthermore, Derrida positions the archive as an act of forgetting and of remembering. Consigning materials or figures to the archive is a type of passive remembrance, permitting the archiving structure to reinscribe materials with other meanings.[7] Derrida's concerns are shared by archival sciences scholars working with colonial archives. Verne Harris argues that archives are incapable of presenting collective representations of events, as they are instead situated and partial truths.[8] Harris draws attention to the multiplicity of social actors who influence the archive, and whose interventions keep the archive in a persistent state of openness through remembrance. Problematising the creation, preservation, and use of archives leads Harris to contend: 'We need to embrace process rather than product. And we need to foster the contestation of social memory, seeing ourselves, conducting ourselves, not as referees but as contestants.'[9] Reframing the archive as actively shaping memory is summarised by Ann Stoler's article on the colonial order of things, warning that 'scholars need to move from archive-as source to archive-as-subject.'[10] With colonial archives, scholars shifted from uncritically accepting sources to questioning their production and circulation.[11] An introductory essay by Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook to a special issue of *Archivaria* on the topic of archives and power insists archives are 'active sites where social

[3] Jeffrey K. Olick, 'Collective Memory: The Two Cultures', *Sociological Theory* 17.3 (1999), pp. 333–48 (p. 339), doi:10.1111/0735-2751.00083.

[4] Olick, 'Collective Memory', p. 341.

[5] Olick, 'Collective Memory', pp. 342-3.

[6] Jacques Derrida, 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression' trans. by Eric Prenowitz, *Diacritics*, 25.2 (1995), pp. 9–63 (p. 11), doi:10.2307/465144.

[7] Derrida, 'Archive Fever', p. 14.

[8] Verne Harris, 'Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa', *Archivaria*, 44.44 (1997), pp. 132–41 (p. 135).

[9] Harris, 'Claiming Less, Delivering More', p. 140.

[10] Ann Laura Stoler, 'Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance', *Archival Science*, 2.1–2 (2002), pp. 87–109 (p. 87), doi:10.3998/mpub.93171.32.

[11] Stoler, 'Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance', p. 91.

power is negotiated, contested, confirmed.'[12] The intentionality of social agents working in the archive leads Brien Brothman to distinguish the 'memory-archivist' from the 'history-archivist':

> Memory's archivist is interested in the past's residue as material for promoting integrated knowledge, social identity, and the formation of group consciousness; history's archivist is interested in finding records and, in them, uncovering evidence to develop a linear narrative about a past that is ours, yet different from us.[13]

Brothman's statement raises interesting questions for the social movement archive, which requires both types of archivists, not only to organise and order movement memories, but also to promote material to reignite struggles in new contexts.

It is only recently that scholars have asked the same questions of social movement archives and memory as those of the colonial archive. Donatella della Porta emphasises this gap in scholarship, despite histories of social movements providing useful roadmaps for the staging of contemporary struggles.[14] Della Porta proposes that social movement memory is a process and an outcome, and that memory can be subjective and multidirectional.[15] Multiple modes of remembering and divergent memories may produce sites of contested knowledge, explored by Aziz Choudry and Salim Vally in the context of social movements. Choudry and Vally acknowledge that contradictory or conflicting memories of social movements shape the creation and transmission of memory when mediated through social movement archives.[16] In the past few years, social movement studies, memory studies, and archival studies saw an activist turn, with scholars proposing the use of memory practices and memory activism to promote social change.[17] Samuel Merrill and Ann Rigney also conceptualise memory practices as both a means and an end, shaping repertoires of action

[12] Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, 'Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory', *Archival Science*, 2.1–2 (2002), pp. 1–19 (p. 1), doi:10.1007/bf02435628.

[13] Brien Brothman, 'The Past That Archives Keep: Memory, History, and the Preservation of Archival Records', *Archivaria*, 51.51 (2001), pp. 48–80 (p. 62).

[14] Donatella della Porta and others, *Legacies and Memories in Movements: Justice and Democracy in Southern Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 9.

[15] della Porta, *Legacies and Memories in Movements*, p. 11.

[16] Aziz Choudry and Salim Vally, *Reflections on Knowledge, Learning and Social Movements: History's Schools* (Taylor and Francis, 2018), p. 7.

[17] Stefan Berger and Christian Koller, *Memory and Social Movements in Modern and Contemporary History: Remembering Past Struggles and Resourcing Protest* (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), p. 9.

and actively producing memory in struggle.[18] Red Chidgey and Joanne Garde-Hansen call attention to the fragility of activist memories, highlighting the critical mnemonic labour of cultural workers in archiving movements.[19] Similarly, Jen Hoyer and Nora Almeida advocate for centring the collective labour of archivists.[20] Hoyer and Almeida insist the social movement archive's guiding principle should be determined by what the materials will be used for, demonstrating the reflexivity of remembrance in shaping the archive's presentation.[21]

TWO ARCHIVES, ONE MOVEMENT: DIVERGENT PRACTICES AND COMPETING HISTORIES

In 2012, James published *Sex, Race, and Class: The Perspective of Winning* to commemorate the fortieth year of the Campaign. The anthology included a controversial claim of co-authorship of 'Women and the Subversion of the Community', typically attributed to Dalla Costa. To support her claim, James cited an article written by Dalla Costa for *Il Giorno*,[22] and critiqued the attribution of the perspective to Italian autonomist thought. Dalla Costa's rebuttal reframed the claim as more than an authorship dispute, arguing James's account threatened the WFH movement's collective origins by erasing its roots in *operaismo* and transnational feminist exchanges (alongside other autonomist currents).[23]

Dalla Costa's archive emerged directly from this dispute as a corrective action: 'In recognition of the importance of this history, we are now assembling our archives and making them public. Thus, I hope that a more balanced view of the early history of this movement will be available to new generations of activists.'[24] Following this statement, the

[18] Samuel Merrill and Ann Rigney, 'Remembering Activism: Means and Ends', *Memory Studies*, 17.5 (2024), pp. 997–1003 (p. 999-1001), doi:0.1177/17506980241262390.

[19] Red Chidgey and Joanne Garde-Hansen, *Museums, Archives and Protest Memory* (Springer International Publishing AG, 2024), p. 30.

[20] Jen Hoyer and Nora Almeida, *The Social Movement Archive* (Litwin Books, LLC, 2021), p. 3.

[21] Hoyer and Almeida, *The Social Movement Archive*, p. 7.

[22] London, Bishopsgate Institute, MS International Wages For Housework Campaign Archive, fol. WFH 1974, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, 'Non 'cosa scegliere' ma 'come combattere'', *Il Giorno*, 5 February 1974.

[23] Padua, Biblioteca Civica, MS Archive of Lotta Femminista per il Salario al lavoro domestico, fol. 10, Dalla Costa, Statement on "Women and the subversion of the community" and her cooperation with Selma James, 27 March 2012.

[24] Padua BC, *MS Lotta Femminista*, fol. 10.

Archivio di Lotta Femminista per il salario al lavoro domestico was donated by Dalla Costa in 2012 to the Biblioteca Civica in Padua, comprising 872 items.

The archive includes materials relating to the Italian chapters of the WFH Campaign, known as the Comitati per il Salario al lavoro domestico, alongside Anglophone WFH groups and others.[25] Most of the documents housed in the archive relate to Campaign activities of the 1970s, 'concepiti per un uso immediato nel lavoro di intervento pratico (volantini e opuscoli) ma anche materiale più analitico destinato alla formazione politica delle attiviste (piccoli libri).'[26] However, the archive also goes beyond Dalla Costa's involvement in the Campaign, charting how her perspective evolved following her departure from the movement in 1978.[27] Regarding the presentation of the archive, the documents are organised firstly by group, then by typology, and finally by chronology. The documents for militant use are prioritised, followed by thematic interventions and theoretical analyses, media coverage, and movement ephemera. Later integrations include a rich repository of correspondence, noted as a particular strength of the archive.[28] This organisational approach results in a nonlinear archive, prioritising the pluralism of group histories and dynamics over a unified history of the International Campaign.

The archive of Lotta Femminista is therefore a decentralised repository that privileges the regional networks that comprised the international movement, emphasising the political interventions performed at the local level. The archive includes materials from several countries but avoids attempts to converge WFH initiatives into a unified, hierarchical history of the movement. When viewed as a subject, the archive questions the value of imposing linearity on the remembrance of feminist social movements, highlighting its strength in the constellation of chapters that worked from the local to the global to struggle for the recognition of unpaid reproductive labour. The strategic ordering of original documents by group and theme emphasises the collective origins and shared labour of the movement as equally important in building and sustaining the Campaign. By

[25] Mariarosa Dalla Costa, 'Introduzione', *Inventory of MS Lotta Femminista per il Salario al lavoro domestico*, 2 February 2012, <https://www.bibliotechecivichepadova.it/sites/default/files/archivio/inventario_ultimo_aggiornato_al_2024_11_07.pdf> [accessed 27 May 2025], p. 11.

[26] Dalla Costa, 'Introduzione', pp. 11-12.

[27] Dalla Costa, 'Introduzione', p. 12.

[28] Dario De Bortoli, 'Premessa all'Integrazione', *Inventory of MS Lotta Femminista per il Salario al lavoro domestico*, 25 June 2018, <https://www.bibliotechecivichepadova.it/sites/default/files/archivio/inventario_ultimo_aggiornato_al_2024_11_07.pdf> [accessed 27 May 2025], p. 23.

focusing on demystifying the activist labour required to grow a movement like WFH, the Lotta Femminista archive is both a record of past struggle and an organisational resource for future mobilisations.

Two exceptions to this structure are documents detailing the authorship debate of 'Women' and Dalla Costa's departure from the Campaign, the very conflicts that necessitated the archive's creation. Although these materials are organised chronologically, unlike the rest of the archive, and include selected correspondence, they remain marginal compared to the archive's dominant focus on materials for militant use and activist training resources. The containment of these small histories of conflict within the movement reflects the dual function of the archive as a site of both remembering and forgetting, as referenced by Derrida. While the inclusion formally acknowledges and provides context to James' disputed claims, they do not demand focus within the breadth of documents available in the archive as a whole. Instead, these conflicts remain a minor chapter in the archive's primary mission of documenting activist labour within the transnational feminist network.

A decade after the establishment of the Lotta Femminista archive, James donated the International Wages for Housework Campaign materials to the Bishopsgate Institute, London. The archive was launched to coincide with the Campaign's fiftieth anniversary, with documents from 1970 to 2022.[29] An article from the Prostitutes Collective, one of the groups associated with the Campaign, references the archive's creation as one of many community events celebrating this milestone, positioning the archive as a technology of memory deployed by those still active in the WFH Campaign.[30] Beyond commemorative references, there is no further information explaining the provenance of the archive, its intended purpose, or target demographic.

The archive is ordered chronologically, with eleven boxes of materials containing fifty-four folders, roughly corresponding to one for each year of the Campaign. While the exact number of items is not provided, the collection appears modest relative to the timeframe covered. The materials include typescripts, movement publications, promotional

[29] 'Wages For Housework Campaign Archive: Administrative/Biographical History', Bishopsgate Institute, n.d. <https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/collections/wages-for-housework-campaign-archive> [accessed 15 May 2025].

[30] 'Event: Wages for Housework, 50 years of campaigning – The Global Women's Strike experience 28 May', English Collective of Prostitutes, 13 May 2022 <https://prostitutescollective.net/event-wages-for-housework-50-years-of-campaigning-the-global-womens-strike-experience-28-may/> [accessed 15 May 2025].

materials, and media coverage of the Campaign, primarily documenting actions of Anglophone groups associated with WFH. Dissenting voices and conflicts, like those featured in the Padua archive, are not present amongst the materials. The arrangement was determined solely by the donors, James and Anne Neale, with the collection's administrative history stating 'no further arrangement required' by the Institute archivists.[31] The reference to materials being added sporadically by the donors throughout 2022 suggests that the archive was created for the commemoration of the movement, rather than the result of an organic accumulation of materials.

Although James and Neale are the donors, the creator of the archive is listed as 'Wages for Housework', suggesting the archive is the product of a collective movement as opposed to individuals. The biographical information accompanying the archive's presentation states that WFH was born when James first articulated the demand at the Women's Liberation Conference in 1972, strategically omitting the meetings of the International Feminist Collective and the discussion of 'Women' that happened in Padua from 1971. This choice constructs a strictly Anglophone history, diverging from the transnational origins of the movement with the collaboration and publication of the *Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (first published 1972).

The chronological structure produces an uninterrupted survey of the Campaign's various activities, now continued as GWS. Rather than a repository for historical inquiry, the archive functions as a curated highlights reel, an approach that is consistent with the commemorative purpose that occasioned the archive's creation. In this context, remembering serves to provide a counterpoint to academic engagements with the Campaign that often centre its early years and Dalla Costa and Federici's contributions. The archive, therefore, reclaims a grassroots legacy that those still active in the Campaign argue has been marginalised by a focus on the theoretical contributions of earlier works, at the expense of ongoing organising work.[32] While James and Neale's approach to archiving does flatten the complex history of the group, particularly in its exclusion of the productive collaboration with Dalla Costa in the early years of the movement, it foregrounds the survival of a campaign that has at times been seen as having concluded in the 1970s.

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[31] 'Wages For Housework Campaign Archive: Administrative/Biographical History', Bishopsgate Institute, n.d. <https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/collections/wages-for-housework-campaign-archive> [accessed 15 May 2025].

[32] Sara Callaway and Selma James, 'Novara Media: Correction request re Wages for Housework Campaign article', Global Women's Strike, 24 March 2022 <https://globalwomenstrike.net/novara-media-correction-request-re-yesterdays-wages-for-housework-campaign-article/> [accessed 29 May 2025].

ARCHIVAL PRACTICES AS MEMORY ACTIVISM

Having compared the provenance, process, and function of these two archives of the WFH Campaign, let us return to Schwartz and Cook's claim that within archival sciences, archives constitute active sites of power. As this case study has shown, far from being a passive repository, the social movement archive remains an active site where power is conferred and contested. In line with the argument of social movement studies scholars Choudry and Vally that contradictory memories shape how social movements are archived, the provenance of Dalla Costa's donation of the Lotta Femminista repository frames the archive as a technology of memory that was deployed to challenge established historical narratives. However, despite initially intending to correct James' provocative claims regarding the early history of the movement, the desire to remember the transnational origins and networks that sustained it shaped the ordering of the archive.

Scholars working at the intersection of memory studies, archival sciences, and social movement studies have emphasised that the production of history and memory is inseparable from the labour of those who curate and maintain the archive. In Padua, the collaboration of archivists and cultural workers exemplify this through their decision to present WFH's early history as decentralised, localised nuclei of organisers and activists, heeding Harris' call for archivists to validate their own role in the construction of social memory. The use of memory activism in the archive to rediscover repertoires of action for the present echoes the archiving approach suggested by Hoyer and Almeida, asking how the archive can best serve its users. The archive's presentation, prioritising documents for militant use, thematic analyses, and materials for activist training, demonstrates how remembering the Campaign can serve both history and memory by providing a multitude of access points. The social movement reality reflected by this choice of organisation emphasises the pluralism of the international network. Such a representation problematises linear histories of social movements, negating the desire to impose an official, singular narrative on a feminist movement whose difference and autonomy within its organisation was a core strength.

The approach taken to the London archive diverges in its conception of power in the archive and the transmission of social movement memory. Memory scholars have acknowledged the importance of collective memory, emphasising how the will to

remember shapes contemporaneous group identity-formation. In the London archive, the repository's commemorative function demonstrates GWS' 'will to remember' and legitimates the ongoing activism under the GWS umbrella. The presentation of the archive as a linear evolution of struggle from 1970 to the establishment of the archive in 2022 contests the traditional association of feminist movements originating within the 1970s as 'second wave' and confined to a specific era of political activity that needs to be recovered, as it was never forgotten. However, as Derrida warns us, power is operated through control of the archive and must not be mistaken as a neutral space, a claim to which the processing of the London archive attests. The decision of James and Neale to undertake all the archiving and processing labour, with no involvement from the Institute, underlines the construction of the archive as an active site of knowledge production. Derrida's claim that we remember and forget through the archive is pronounced in light of James and Neale's retrospective document selection, demonstrated through the erasure of the Italian activists' contributions. Therefore, despite the importance of archivists and users in contributing to the power and purpose of the social movement archive, there is a significant amount of control that lies with its creator, and potential users should acknowledge how the archive's construction influences the narrative being transmitted about the movement.

BEYOND THE ARCHIVE: MEMORY, MOVEMENTS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

To return to the disputes about the history of the WFH movement that prompted the creation of these archives, I believe reading either of the archives as definitive records of movement history would be to err in judgment. Instead, the value lies in adopting a comparative approach, juxtaposing multiple archives to interrogate how social movement memory is constructed and for what ends. The divergent approaches to archiving the WFH Campaign reflect the reality of remembering an international feminist movement, a reality that is conflicted, messy, and multivocal. While Dalla Costa's archive foregrounds multiplicity and debate, emphasising the interconnectedness of activist networks, James' archive underscores continuity and success, often prioritising a singular narrative. These contrasting approaches not only reflect divergent recollections of the movement's history but also highlight the broader tensions inherent in memory activism and social movement memory.

This comparative study of the Padua and London WFH archives underscores how archives play a critical role in the creation and transmission of movement memory and history. Unlike distant historical events, these archives invite engagement from users seeking a connection with the present whilst narrating the movement's past, whether through the ongoing WFH Campaign or the different thematic priorities of the movement. The dual purpose of the archive demands that users, archivists, and donors consider the archive as a collective framework of memory creation. How we think about the past has consequences for our present, and how we archive the past influences our approach to today's activist campaigns and mobilisations. In the context of social movements, it is impossible to distinguish cleanly between history and memory work: the evolution of struggle engages different social actors in the frameworks of collective memory as they develop and use the movement archive, continuously shaping and determining the archive's meaning and power.

Moving forward, we need more contributions and frameworks to conceptualise the relationship between social movement archives and collective memory. The goal in acknowledging the archive as an active site of knowledge production is not to reconcile contradictions but to embrace them, recognising that archives say as much about the future as they do about the past. By doing so, we honour the multitude of feminist struggles and ensure that these histories and memories remain vital tools for ongoing resistance.